



The Extra: Literary History Without Sexism? Feminist Studies and Canonical Reconception

Citation

Buell, Lawrence. 1987. The extra: Literary history without sexism? Feminist studies and canonical reconception. *American Literature* 59(1): 102-114.

Published Version

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2926487>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3710396>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

THE EXTRA

Literary History Without Sexism? Feminist Studies and Canonical Reconception

LAWRENCE BUELL

Oberlin College

HOW can we ensure that feminist revisionism of the last decade permanently alters the American literary canon? Having incautiously agreed to tackle that issue at the 1984 MLA, I experienced severe pre-convention jitters. First, I felt the usual compunctions of a male belatedly involved in feminist studies about to parade himself as an expert. Second, and more important, I felt perplexed about the question that the original question begs. Should feminist revisionism really seek to recreate canons? Or should it refuse to ally itself with the whole process of molding literary history into canons, on the ground that the very concept of canon implies a suspect authoritarianism, that a "new canon" in practice would likely represent a modest overlay of women's writings on top of an essentially androcentric base?

This latter argument has been cogently pressed by Annette Kolodny in reaction to the projected Columbia and Cambridge histories of American literature.¹ Given how tightly most of us are held by preestablished categories, Kolodny fears, and with reason, that these projects will not yield a revised conception of canon so much as the old canon plus a series of ghetto-chapters for the scribbling women, the local colorists, and so forth. I for one am acutely conscious of how limited a difference my study of women's

¹ "The Integrity of Memory: Creating a New Literary History of the United States," *American Literature*, 57 (1985), 291-307. For editorial explanations of the two projects discussed by Kolodny, see Emory Elliott, "New Literary History: Past and Present," *American Literature*, 57 (1985), 611-21; and Sacvan Bercovitch, "America as Canon and Context: Literary History in a Time of Dissensus," *American Literature*, 58 (1986), 99-108.

writing and feminist scholarship has made to the basic structure of my Columbia chapter on the Transcendentalist movement.

A merely pragmatic objection to feminist endorsement of such consensus-seeking enterprises can be met by the pragmatic rejoinder that it is better for a little more attention to be paid by our anthologies and literary histories to women's and minority contributions than no attention at all. The sheer allotment of more space to women's writings constitutes at least a rudimentary acknowledgment that we must change our settled habits. Given the vastness of the project of putting all literary history under the sign of gender, an elegant reformulation may take many years.

A more fundamental concern, however, as Kolodny also points out, is that the drive to reformulate the canon bespeaks a conservative hankering to restabilize. One reason why we respond to the call for a new and improved American literary history is that we yearn to recover the sense of common purpose the profession supposedly once had—an impulse at odds with that of feminist scholarship, which “asserts as its central critical category not commonality but *difference*.”² Kolodny forces us to ask whether our interest in canonical redefinition actually boils down to the desire to neutralize the challenges of women's and ethnic studies so that we can continue to teach our beloved Melville-Twain-Hemingway-centered course on the American novel while doing our bit for women's writing with a week or so toward the end on Jewett and Cather.

That indeed is a real peril. Before reacting to it, however, one must ask whether the opposition of feminist scholarship to canon-oriented thinking is inherent or historical. On this point, the answer seems quite clear. Although as long as the sexes are socialized differently some aspects of men's and women's literary achievement will remain mutually unassimilable, feminist oppositionism in American literary studies has drawn most of its energy from a specific historical imbalance: the acceptance as normative of a number of traits extrapolated from a limited number of (mostly) male literary texts, such as the theory of the cult of wilderness in

² Kolodny, p. 293.

American writing, which in its exposition from D. H. Lawrence to Leslie Fiedler presumes a male author and a male experimenter.³

The immediate remedy for this imbalance is work like Kolodny's *The Land Before Her*, which provides an archaeology of the literary experience of the frontier for American women to set against the better known tradition of male romance.⁴ In the long run, however, something more intricate than an oppositional model will be needed to ensure that women's writing unjustly deemed subcanonical is taken seriously outside the curricular and scholarly domains of Women's Studies, and—more significantly—to ensure that either the old canonical texts or the newer candidates for canonical inclusion or re-inclusion (like the Panther captivity discussed by Kolodny, or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, recently promoted by Penguin from its American Library to a Penguin Classic) are studied as fully as their potential warrants. Essentially, the two genders' literary experiences, like their social experiences, are inseparable; and in their inseparability they illuminate each other more often positively than negatively.

The present state of literary research does not permit us to see this well enough. It's understandable that the great majority of work still be focused either on the traditional male-oriented canon, since that is mainly what still counts in the journals and in the curriculum; or on the new female canon, in an attempt to establish its integrity and distinctiveness. As a result we have good studies, for example, of the masculine *bildungsroman* and of women's developmental fiction, but as yet no attempt of comparable seriousness to coordinate the two clearly interrelated traditions into a single picture.⁵

Just as the critique of androcentrism—the first major wave of feminist revisionism—has helped give rise to the intensive study of the distinctive traditions of women's writing, so both of these movements will no doubt help give rise to an increasingly vigorous

³ *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Seltzer, 1923); *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion, 1960). The masculinist assumptions of this and related work are unpacked in Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly*, 33 (1981), 123–39.

⁴ *The Land Before Her* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).

⁵ See for example, Jerome Buckley, *Season of Youth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974) and Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978).

investigation of literary history conceived in the broadest sense as a field in which women's and men's writing seem inextricably intertwined in a play of symbiosis and contention. I say "give rise to" rather than "give place to," because as long as literary historiography continues to be built upon normative generalizations about human experience that privilege men's experience above women's, and as long as women's writing remains comparatively speaking a *terra incognita*, the first two types of investigation will be crucial. Their gains to date, however, should not be underestimated. Today's scholarship on mid-nineteenth-century writing by American women, for example, is far more extensive and sophisticated than what is being done on their male counterparts.

The risk of directing more of the energy of gender-oriented studies to the intersection and confluence of men's and women's writing is that feminist scholarship might become relegated to a sort of handmaiden's status. Such could become the case if, for example, the valuable work now being done on the influence of female significant others upon male canonical figures were to become *the* norm.⁶ But the risk of shying away from the subjects of intersection and confluence is even greater: namely that gender-oriented studies might too parochially limit their sights to the gender-specific aspects of women's writing and the misogynistic aspects of men's. If I am to give a full and satisfying account of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in my American Romanticism course, I must be prepared to represent it not only as an apogee / critique of domestic sentimentalism that attempts to claim a special sort of moral-political power for women, not only as a distinctively different sort of accomplishment from our classic male antebellum fictions, but also to line it up together with (say) *Moby-Dick* as a post-Calvinist prophetic testament that scrutinizes the limits of American theological and cultural ethnocentrism using an array of comparable devices like idealized nonwhites and gothic hero-villains.—Or with *Leaves of Grass*, as the 1850s' most ambitious literary attempt at synthesizing all strata of American society under the aegis of a

⁶ See for example, Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley, eds., *Mothering the Mind* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984).

cross-sectional religiocentric vision based on Stowe's equivalent of Whitmanian "adhesiveness" as the bond. To work with these texts in triangulation is to become convinced that all three are somewhat impoverished if treated without reference to the others.

Here is a more extended example of the kind of project I have in mind.

A few years ago, I was seriously tempted to undertake a study of the figure of the Romantic artist as social prophet, a study that would combine my prior knowledge of the formative period of American writing with the knowledge I had later acquired of British Romanticism and was then acquiring of some of the newer English literatures of the developing world. I was struck by the fact that the Miltonic-Romantic conception of art as prophecy has tended either through transplantation or fortuitous analogy to thrive in the literary nationalisms of developing countries, from the Transcendental aesthetic in America to the literary activism of pioneer Indian English novelist Mulk Raj Anand (heavily dependent upon Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* for rhetoric if not for substance) to the reformulation of African aesthetics by Wole Soyinka.⁷ Proceeding down the path of study and speculation, I was halted by the realization that my subject was an overwhelmingly male-sponsored ideology. All the major manifestoes, all the exponents I had in mind, were male. I, who had prided myself on taking Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Stoddard seriously sooner even than a number of my women colleagues, might be on the verge of committing myself to a long-term study of a rarefied form of literary sexism.

What enabled me to see this were two concurrent studies of nineteenth-century women writers' difficulties with the Miltonic-Romantic tradition: *The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and *Women Poets and Poetic Identity*, by Margaret Homans. Both books clearly establish that Romantic prophecy has historically been a male project.⁸

At the same time, the vigor and clarity with which they make that case open a space for further investigation. As one begins, with

⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976); Mulk Raj Anand, *Apology for Heroism* (Bombay: Popular, 1957), pp. 86-92.

⁸ *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979); *Women Poets and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).

their aid, to reflect intensively about gender as a Romanticist variable, two complications arise. First, the figure of the artist as romantic prophet is clearly in some senses a "feminine" image: a figure who by self-definition occupies a marginal position relative to society's power centers, who prizes innocent perception above socially initiated perception (hence the romantic reliance upon women and children as centers of value), who valorizes intuition and inspiration above rationality and sequential argument. Of course any deep discussion of these feminized attributes of the male romantic prophet-poet must reckon with the fact that at least as many aspirants to the role were misogynists like Thoreau as were would-be androgynes like Whitman, who himself imagines the ideal poet as a male persona. What initially might seem feminized sensitivity on the male Romantic's part can quite peacefully coexist with a cozy patriarchalism, as Erik Thurin has shown in Emerson's case.⁹ The under-explored point remains, however, that the distinctive romantic vision of the poet from the start of the period and with increasing self-consciousness occupies the traditionally feminine pole, so that beginning with Shelley's mythification of Keats in *Adonais* if not before, Romanticist imagings of the nominally male artist figure become either increasingly epicene or preoccupied with the problem of retrieval or loss of masculinity.¹⁰

This latter concern is of special importance to the literary history of America, given the utilitarian cast of thinking that tended to see art as inconsequential or epiphenomenal to begin with. Emerson's preoccupation with defining the sort of action appropriate to scholars, Hawthorne's portrait of the artist as Owen Warland, Irving's portrait of the man of imagination as Rip Van Winkle, Whitman's insistence of solidarity with young mechanics—these are all analogous gestures of discomfort with a role not perceived as male-identified that only at this moment are starting to be investigated with the care they deserve.¹¹

⁹ Erik Ingvar Thurin, *Emerson as Priest of Pan* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981).

¹⁰ See particularly two studies of androgyny as it bears on the work of Percy (and in the latter case Mary) Shelley: Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979); and William Veeder, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986).

¹¹ I have in mind especially the work of David Leverenz; see "Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache: Reading *The Scarlet Letter*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1983), 552-75; and

A second line of complication suggested by feminist revisionary studies of romantic ideology results from the sharpness with which they differentiate women's literary orientation from men's, e.g., the argument that women writers suffer during the period from the anxiety of authorship rather than of influence (Gilbert and Gubar) or that romantic logocentrism is a male construct that either silences female poets or provokes their dissent (Homans). These are valuable distinctions but in need of two sorts of refinements. One would be to recognize that the alienated positions imputed to women writers also apply in some measure to their male counterparts. Doubt about logocentricity, for example, marks even the chief expositors of Romantic prophecy, like Wordsworth and Emerson, as Paul De Man perceived when he (overzealously) accused the Romantic theory of symbolism of ontological bad faith.¹² Conversely, not all Anglo-American women writers between 1780 and 1850 were equally uncomfortable with the mode of romantic prophecy (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for one, was inspired rather than daunted by Wordsworthian aesthetics), and individual women writers were sometimes inconsistent on this point—Emily Dickinson, for example. Women writers of the period, in addition sometimes to imaging poesis in ways indistinguishable from male Romantic counterparts (cf. Dickinson's "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" and Emerson's "To clothe the fiery thought"), also sponsored specifically female images of art as prophecy, such as the mythical figures of Cassandra and the Sibyl, and the more historical figure of the improvisator (de Staël's Corinne being the *locus romanticus*).

What these considerations point to is the desirability of studying literature with gender in mind as an important if not omnipresent variable, in the expectation of finding a richer interplay of difference and confluence than either old-style "gender-blind" mascu-

"The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," *PMLA*, 101 (1986), 38–56. For the late nineteenth century, a valuable study is Alfred Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982). In back of both of these studies stands Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), one of whose key contributions is to dramatize the strength of the image of literature as a feminized pursuit in antebellum America.

¹² "The Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 211.

linist criticism or most new-style feminist revisionist criticism permits us to place at the center of our investigation. My own favorite case in point here is the ambiguous relationship between the two prefaces to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the first (1818) ventriloquized by Percy, the second (1831) composed by herself.¹³ The first confidently places *Frankenstein* in the great western tradition of lofty didacticisms from Aeschylus to Milton. Mary Shelley as unacknowledged legislator of the world. The second makes no such claims but has as its main purpose merely to narrate, rather apologetically, the empowering dream that gave her the germ of the idea for the book—"my hideous progeny" as she calls it. At first glance, the 1831 autobiographical introduction deprecates and trivializes the claims of the 1818 preface-manifesto. Female discomfort with art as romantic prophecy was apparently never so dramatized.

Yet in assigning the genesis of her art to dream-vision, Mary Shelley is taking a version of the romantic highroad of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and her husband's *Defence of Poetry*—although Percy's claims for the prophetic authority of such moments are advanced by her, to the extent that they are advanced at all, obliquely and intermittently through the moral charge of the rhetoric ("I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts") rather than enunciated as an aesthetic doctrine. In a somewhat similar vein, Harriet Beecher Stowe defended *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as God-inspired without ever arguing for the case for art as a visionary mode, indeed rather arguing against that position in the scant literary criticism she did produce: practical tips to aspiring women authors as to how to master the craft of writing. For both Shelley and Stowe, a narrative of biographical cataclysm substitutes—or masquerades—for the more direct literary assertiveness of the romantic-prophetic mode. A significant difference, yes; but a difference within a broader frame of likeness.

The case of Mary Shelley, who authored a novel in the romantic prophecy tradition that derives its main force from its critique of that tradition and then authored a kind of anti-manifesto that

¹³ Both are printed in James Rieger's edition of *Frankenstein* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982).

makes *de facto* the case for art as vision even as it shrinks from pressing equivalent claims, suggests that we have only begun to appreciate the intricacy of gender variables as forces in literary history and that to understand them to the fullest the elements of commonality and difference between the literary production and experience of women and men of the Romantic era will need to be sifted with a more rigorous comparatism than has yet been tried. The result, I suspect, would be to affirm the basic accuracy of the feminist depiction of Romantic ideology as a patriarchal construct, but with a number of enriching qualifications. Fuller attention would be paid, for instance, to the participation of formative female influences (such as Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, and—despite her praises of rational discipline over undisciplined sensibility—Mary Wollstonecraft), the valorization of stereotypically feminine traits of thought and expression, the empowerment that that valorization gave to some women writers of the period (through the legitimation of heart-religion as opposed to doctrinal legalism, for instance), and the de-masculinization of art as a field of endeavor from the standpoint of male writers, especially in America. The net effect of these complications might in the long run be the reinterpretation of Romantic ideology as a vehicle of transition from solidly patriarchal control of literary institutions to a more open literary marketplace.

We cannot expect this kind of re-envisionment to complete itself until the two earlier projects in gender-oriented literary studies have defamiliarized our view of the old canon and familiarized our view of the literary values and traditions more or less distinctive to women's writing. But it cannot be too early to imagine the shape that such an effort might take. Let me attempt, then, to suggest some of the ways in which a comprehensive rewriting of American literary history might be assisted by the important contributions of feminist revisionism to date.

First, those contributions can help us toward a profounder explanation of the causality of literary history than is afforded by the formalist-poststructuralist succession in American literary criticism, which has provided us with powerful methodologies for approaching texts individually and synchronically but which does not encourage extra-textual explanations of how literature is con-

textually shaped. Gender-oriented study is illuminating here both as pointing the investigator to one of culture's most basic institutions and as pointing to the distortiveness of any clear-cut one-to-one correspondence between biographical gender and the alignment of the individual literary product within gender-specific traditions. Gender-oriented study thus in principle both establishes the importance of social forces in literary history and teaches us to resist simple deterministic accounts of those forces, leading us to a model of literary institutions as partially autonomous but not independent.

Second, feminist revisionism in American literary studies, by emphasizing the Euro-American scope of women's literary culture, can help us to avoid the Americanist's most persistent and deep-seated disciplinary ethnocentrism: the myth of American literature as a distinctively native growth. The elements of native distinctiveness, naturally stressed by the first generations of American literature scholars as they attempted to justify the new specialization, now need to be counterbalanced by studies—still lamentably few—that discuss American writing from a transcontinental perspective.¹⁴

Third, feminist scholarship may inspire us to attend more seriously to the interlinkages between "serious" and "popular" literature and thereby bring us to realize how porous is the boundary between them and how artificial and quaint is the still standard practice of generalizing about the nature of American literature on the basis of a limited number of mountainpeak achievements. From a feminist revisionary standpoint, this practice is objectionable chiefly because it tends in practice to relegate all but a few women authors to the ranks of the subliterate. But the anti-elitist argument is applicable to men's writing also. Certain features of Hawthorne's work, for example, such as the transformation of Pearl from elf-child to real woman when the icon of family

¹⁴ The most trenchant recent critic of the limitations—the futility as he sees them—of American literary-historiographical claims to American distinctiveness is William Spengemann. See for example, "American Things / Literary Things: The Problem of American Literary History," *American Literature*, 57 (1985), 456–81. The most ambitious attempt to date to see nineteenth-century American letters in a transcontinental perspective (that at the same time makes place for the American distinctiveness that Spengemann questions) is Robert Weisbuch's *Atlantic Double-Cross* (Univ. of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

unity is propitiated, simply cannot be understood without reference to contemporary popular women's fiction and a model of the interdependence of "the classic" and "the popular novel" that pictures the first not merely as distancing itself from the second but as drawing nourishment from it. Likewise, the contrast between (say) Thoreau's zealous craftsmanly dedication to rewriting *Walden* and the literary professionalism that mid-nineteenth-century American women writers manifest much more unabashedly than do the canonical male writers should not be taken as a mark of caste difference (the hack versus the artist with a conscience) so much as a relationship of complements notwithstanding difference in which the male writers evince a displaced form of the scribbling women's entrepreneurialism, while the latter exhibit a version of the former's sententious high-mindedness.¹⁵

Fourth, and related to the previous point, feminist revisionism will force us to complicate our notion of an American literary mainstream. As noted above, the wilderness tradition in American narrative will have to be redescribed as essentially a male tradition. The already tottering romance hypothesis (British writers write novels, Americans write romances) may have been given its death blow by feminist studies demonstrating the essentially novelistic character of mid-nineteenth-century popular women's fiction, which thus ironically looks much more avant-garde than most of the work of Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville.¹⁶

Fifth, feminist studies force one to ponder in new ways the ideology of genre. What are we to make of the fact that the first foundations of local colorism are laid by male-dominated genres like topographical poetry of the late eighteenth century and the essay-sketch tradition exemplified by Irving, but in its mature

¹⁵ The basis for the greater pragmatic forthrightness of mid-nineteenth century women writer's accounts of their literary objectives, as against the comparatively idealized accounts of most male canonical figures, is worthy of more intensive study. For further comment, see Buell, *New England Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 378, 381, 414, as well as Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 164-79 (on women's literary professionalism); and Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985) (for the male canonical figures).

¹⁶ Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, pp. 36-37, points out the novelistic character of the works she surveys; Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), extends this insight in a different key by visualizing sentimental ideology as in some respects a backdrop to the realist-naturalist tradition.

phase, after mid-century, it is largely taken over by women writers? What are we to make of the reverse pattern in the novel of cross-sectional comparison, naturalized into America by women writers (Maria Sedgwick, Sarah Hale, Harriet Beecher Stowe) but captured after the Civil War by male writers (John W. DeForest, Henry James in *The Bostonians*, later William Faulkner in *Light in August*), in whose hands what had been primarily a socio-historical inquiry becomes narrowed down to a misogynistically-framed sexual battle between the representatives of north and south? What are we to make of the fact that some American genres criss-cross gender lines quite fluidly (the jeremiad, the captivity, the hymn)? A comprehensive American literary history would not necessarily want to put these gender-specific questions at the very head of its discussion of American genres, but its understanding of genre as a historically significant variable would benefit from having considered them.

Sixth, feminist revisionary study should force us to confront and explain the surprising (to those educated in the pre-feminist era) priority of women writers in so many areas of subsequent national literary achievement. The first producers of work in quantity (in some cases quality also) in American poetry, drama, and fiction were Anne Bradstreet, Mercy Otis Warren, and Susanna Haswell Rowson. Another American woman wrote the first best-seller in American prose, founding a genre in the process (Mary Rowlandson); another wrote the nineteenth-century's biggest seller and most influential political novel (Harriet Beecher Stowe); another became arguably the greatest woman poet in the English language (Emily Dickinson). All this in spite of the fact that American women at no point down through the mid-nineteenth century probably constituted more than one-quarter of publishing authors. These instances, notwithstanding, of female priority suggest that whatever the degree of social patriarchy, whatever the demographic skewing in the percentage of women as published writers, women probably functioned as the carriers and custodians of vernacular literary culture in premodern America to a greater degree than we have yet realized.

Finally, to return to the specific subject of canonicity, feminist revisionism will not and probably should not do away with the

project of canon formation itself, if only because canon creation is unavoidable. To create a monograph or even a syllabus—maybe especially a syllabus—is to engage in canon-making activity. Even if we protest to ourselves and our audience that we intend no authoritative pronouncement on who the important authors are, our choices of what texts to feature will be perceived, and rightly so, as canonical commitments, or at least as gestures toward commitment. But feminist scholars need not view canon-building merely as a necessary evil, because feminist studies can hope to have great impact on the canonizing work in which we cannot help but engage. They can hope to foment reorderings in the pre-feminist canon (the demotion of Hemingway, for instance); they can hope to expand the canon to include more women authors (Kate Chopin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, H. D., and many others). They can hope to make canonical thinking more self-conscious, so that scholarship will never again assume that Emerson is *the* central American antebellum writer with quite the same alacrity as in the 1970s. And they can hope to help ensure that the concept of canon itself is sufficiently problematized as to convince the profession once and for all of the impossibility of extricating canon-formation from interest-group politics. These would be very significant achievements, and although they may not all be obtainable tomorrow, I am optimistic enough to think they have been brought within hailing distance.¹⁷

¹⁷ Versions of this essay were delivered as papers at the Modern Language Association annual meeting (1984), the University of Michigan, and Albion College. I am grateful for criticism received on all three occasions, as well as from my students in seminars on Romanticism and gender at Oberlin College and the University of Chicago.